DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 168 068 CS 502 377

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TITLE What's He Doing There? Or, Can a Communicator Find Happiness in Management?
PUB DATE Oct 78
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Conference of the Industrial Communication Council (New York, New York, October 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business; Business Skills; *Career Change; *Communication (Thought Transfer); Communication Skills; *Management; *Managerial Occupations; *Occupational Mobility; Organizational Communication; Vocational Adjustment
IDENTIFIERS *Editors

ABSTRACT

There are a number of opportunities for communication experts to move into fulltime general management. The particular role that they can fill to advantage to themselves and to the company is as generalists with the abilities to analyze, balance points of view, be objective, present issues effectively, and retain a sense of values. Some skills need to be retained and broadened or sharpened including being a good communicator, retaining a broad approach to life, knowing when to listen, and remaining healthily skeptical. Some skills will need to be developed from scratch by most communicators. These include developing financial know-how, especially knowing the language and having an acquaintance with statistical yardsticks; continuing to broaden perspective; not losing touch with people in communications; and learning to consider not only "how" but "what," "why," and "whether." Some observations about how to move into management include: keep positioning yourself to learn new skills, and seize every opportunity that comes along to do something out of the ordinary. (TJ)

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ED168068

Speech to Conference of
Industrial Communication Council, Inc.
October 24, 1978

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What's He Doing There? Or, Can a Communicator Find Happiness in Management?

It's good to be with you. That's a conventional opening but it's much more than that for me since I still identify myself with ICC and the people who make it up.

Today's title was not chosen lightly, particularly the sub-title: Can an editor find true happiness in management. Right away you know that deep down I still identify myself as an editor. That's one reason why I identify with ICC. There's another. ICC was the organization which, 15 years ago, opened my eyes to management as a career opportunity. Until that time I had been a working editor and editorial work was my career objective. It might still be had not I switched from "straight" editorial work on one of McGraw-Hill's magazines to "inside" editorial jobs as editor of our "house organ." The first thing I learned was that you don't call it a house organ. The second was that the challenging opportunities in internal communication were not being addressed by the bigger and older associations but by a very small and almost secretive group known as the Industrial Communication Council. The first luncheon meeting I attended was downtown at Claude Allen's place (that ought to set Claude up for the day -- referring to Chase Manhattan as his place) and it was a mind-blower. I realized then -- and it has been confirmed many times over -- that most ICC'ers think of themselves as managers as well as communicators.

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If that's so, it's probably necessary for me to define a little bit more precisely what I'm doing here, being presumptuous by talking on a subject like "the editor in management." Piecing together conversations with Sandra O'Connell and Peter, I've come to the conclusion that you -- or the program committee at le .st -- felt you'd like to hear from someone who appears to have left your ranks and now works full time as a manager.

I'm glad to oblige but it poses something of a problem -- because, as I've said, no matter what the job title, I still think of myself as something of an editor. And once an editor, always an editor -- if you need confirmation of that, ask Peter Haas or Dwight Rangeler who will tell you in horrifying detail what it's like to work for an ex-editor. As a matter of fact -- and knowing full well that this is going to be played back to me on many a future occasion -- I'd hazard the guess right now that the biggest obstacle an editor faces when moving into management is the temptation to continue being the editor. I'm sure you all would agree that there's seldom a piece of copy that you personally couldn't improve just a bit. The temptation to do just that when you have the last word is overwhelming. You simply have to learn to resist that urge. If the copy doesn't work, fix it, of course. If it does work but in a slightly different way than you'd phrase it, learn to leave it alone.

Beyond that, what kind of advice or insights can a "has been" offer a group like this. This talk is likely to ramble a bit, but basically I propose to talk about two things -- first, the role in general management for one with a communicator's background, and, two, some things I think a communicator will probably have to learn in moving full time into management.

Note carefully that the first point was phrased very carefully -- I said I'd talk about a role in general management for one with a communicator's background. The adjective is important because, as I've already said, my own experience indicates that ICC people are already deeply in management and that they tend to be valued in their own companies not as communicators alone but as managers of a communications function.

Which leads to an observation that I'd like to get off my chest before trying to climb back on the rickety outline I've just sketched.

The point I'd like to make has to do with attitude. It's not universally true, but I've seen it often enough to be concerned -- communicators sometimes tend to develop an inferiority complex. On occasion, they take refuge in a garrison mentality. One sometime follows the other. Let's talk about the inferiority complex first. How does that happen?

Usually, I think, because of the stereotypes we've created about organizational structure --now I didn't say business structure but organizational structure per se, because I think the same traits are to be found in the non-commercial world too.

We all tend to pay too much attention to pecking orders and to subscribe to a work ethic which seems to say you're not a success unless you scramble for the top of the heap. That in turn leads some folks to downgrade the jobs that aren't clustered around the top of the pyramid. I'm not suggesting that everyone aspires to be CEO. But too often we downgrade our own role by deciding that we aren't really being true to ourselves if we don't aspire to the boss' job.

That's not always a happy nor a wise decision. In the world of publishing, we at McGraw-Hill long ago discovered that some of our good editors felt they would be regarded as less than successful if they didn't aspire to the top editorial positions on their magazines. There's just one thing wrong with that. A great reporter or a superb editor specializing in a particular field often turns out to be a fairly mediocre managing or chief editor. Yet the individual felt he had no option but to seek the next rung on the ladder. It was a Parkinsonian principle at work. We've changed that by creating editorial grades which allow for appropriate compensation without moving into the so-called "top spots" on a magazine, and we've done it by letting those individuals know that we appreciate them for what they already are.

My point is simply that it's important to observe the old maxim -- to thy ownself be true. It would be a silly magazine which had only managing and chief editors on its staff, and it would be a ridiculous publishing house which had all of its editors move beyond that field and into management. Fortunately, people have different aspirations and not everyone wants to play the same role.

Still the temptation is there. The worst thing I ever did for anyone was to convince a good editor to join a public relations staff I headed a few years ago. He wasn't cut out for PR, he was desperately unhappy, and, while he did certain things well, he obviously was expendable in that particular structure. The happiest thing I ever did for anyone was to be lucky enough to find him another editorial slot to which he transferred. He's doing well and has been promoted twice.

In that case my friend knew best -- he was happy as an editor and was satisfied. I suspect somewhat the opposite is true of some of your compatriots. I've detected a feeling among internal communicators that they feel guilty about enjoying their work -- guilty because they think deep down that they should be aspiring to something beyond industrial communication.

In fact I found it particularly significant that a recent ICC study on career decisions was called "Beyond Communications." I have two problems with that title. First, and quite inadvertently I'm sure, it seems to suggest an unfortunate value judgment. In addition, communications is such a basic managerial skill that I think it's wrong to talk in terms of going "beyond" it. Move on to another career, if you will, but take your communications skills along. They'll stand you in good stead -- which brings me neatly back to the first point I said long ago I was going to discuss -- the role a communicator can play in general management.

When I started thinking about this talk I made one resolution -- which I've broken several times already and which I can see now I will keep violating. I was determined not to make this a personal testament and to downplay the first person singular. It's a nice idea but it doesn't work, and so I'll apologize for the personal tone just once and then go right ahead and talk in that vein.

My own conviction after 20 years as a communicator and almost 10 in general management is that there are a tremendous number of skills and traits which are common to both fields. The communicator is essentially a generalist (as opposed to an engineer or an accountant or some other specialized

trade). And despite the fact that business seems to be intent on adding new specialists (witness the salaries being paid newly-graduated MBA's these days) -- despite that, there's room in every organization (and near the top) for the generalist. MBA's can learn to play that role and so can accountants and engineers -- but they must consciously broaden themselves if they are to do so. Communicators on the other hand tend to take naturally to the generalist's role.

That's not so surprising for the truth is that communications is the touchstone, the common denominator for virtually every business function. Let me illustrate by turning once again to personal experience.

--- I'm not an accountant but I've worked productively on task forces wrestling with the management implications of accounting problems.

--- I'm not an MBA but I've tackled complex operating studies, some of which would have made beautiful cases for the Harvard "B" School.

--- I'm not a lawyer or a tax specialist but I have headed committees concerned with those questions in particular.

Now I haven't done a survey to see how widespread this acceptance of generalists is. I'm speaking only from personal experience. There are two of us on the president's staff at McGraw-Hill. The second is even more of an egg head than I am -- a writer, Ph.D., teacher, librarian. Yet he's a demon at dissecting an operating statement and he's uncanny at diagnosing business problems. As I look further around McGraw-Hill, I find a lot of other non-specialists who have moved into management.

Why does business rely on the generalist? To find an answer I tried an experiment. I jotted down the attributes of a good communicator, then set aside those specialized skills -- like sizing an illustration or speccing copy or directing a photographer -- which are unique to the profession. I was left with a fairly impressive list of talents which I am convinced describe a manager as well as a communicator. Those talents include:

--- analytical ability, the knack of organizing a body of material, making value judgments;

--- the ability to balance points of view, to reach a compromise where possible but to make a choice where one must be made;

--- a degree of objectivity which some specialists have trouble achieving;

--- an ability to present issues effectively;

--- a sense of values (call it conscience if you want).

Now try matching those attributes against a very interesting question which was asked a group of CEO's recently by John Arnold, who runs a management consulting service called ExecuTrak Systems. The group was asked to specify the five objectives most important to them during their first year as CEO. The resulting list contains many more than five answers. Not surprisingly "maximizing" profits was most frequently mentioned, but then the list broadened a bit to include:

--- reorienting or refocusing key business strategies and company strategy;

--- communicating your own management style;

--- winning support of the management team;

--- clarifying charters, roles, relationships, and accountability within the company;

--- identifying and gaining agreement on key corporate issues;

--- improving company image with its major publics;

--- winning support of the board;

--- increasing management and corporate integrity.

Admitedly that's a selective list -- I've left out some objectives that tend to be more specific -- improving competitive position, designing new products, etc. Still, I think it's amazing that the priority tasks which a CEO faces tend to correspond to such a degree to the talents which seem to characterize the business generalist -- and in particular the communicator.

I hope then that I've made a case for my first contention -- that there is a natural role in management for the generalist and that communicators tend to be natural generalists. It's a case based first on logic and then buttressed by personal experience. I realize that logic doesn't always carry the day, and I'm very much aware that conclusions based on personal experience can be challenged. Still I think I'm right: There can be a rewarding role in management for those of us who choose to follow that path.

So much for point one -- which brings us logically to point two -- what does a communicator have to learn if he/she aspires to a management career? I'm a litt'e hesitant about pontificating on this subject because every individual is different and some of the suggestions I'm about to make may simply not be applicable in your own case. Please bear with me, however.

To simplify things, let's talk first about present skills to be utilized -- skills which may need broadening or sharpening. And, then, let's talk about lessons to be learned -- these include some skills but are largely attitudinal changes.

The first piece of advice is deceptively simple -- remain always the good communicator. Those are the skills which are already accepted by management and, sorry to say, they're the very skills which sometimes are lacking in management ranks. A logical presentation, flavored with a judicious amount of showmanship, will often swing the jury in your favor. Two weeks ago I submitted the medium range plan for the departments reporting to me. I have pack rat tendencies and have year by year assembled a growing group of operations. This year I shuffled activities between departments and then to complicate matters added funding for (1) our first corporate ad campaign, (2) establishment of a foundation, and (3) establishment of a prototype administrative center on one of our executive floors. The bottom line made me look like the last of the big spenders. Believe me, I took special care with the written narrative, building my case point by point, anticipating objections, providing justification. It paid off -- the budget sailed through unscathed but even more impressive (and something I'll cherish for months to come) was the phone call from the financial planning vp who was supposed to be preparing the cross-examination. He wanted to know if I had a financial background. When I asked why, he said it was the tightest budget presentation he'd ever seen and he figured only a financial man could have prepared it. He didn't

realize it but he was affirming the fact that communications skills are a major asset even in the arcane world of finance.

Communicators not only know what to say -- even more important they know what not to say. That's a skill which comes in handy in a management environment which is being subtly poisoned by gobblydegook perpetrated in some circles. My friend, Jim Kennedy, who lives the good life in Fitzwilliams, N.H., by publishing a widely-quoted newsletter called "Consultants News," dropped me a note the other day suggesting that I might like to warn this group about the kind of language he found in the program of the Academy of Management's annual meeting this year. The list (and this is not complete) included: typology. . .heuristic decision-making. . .cognitive style. . . coalitional theory. . .propositional inventory. . .constellation of skills. . . organistically oriented intervention. . .configural cue utilization. . . multivariate studies. . .asymmetric rivalries.

The academicians aren't alone. Every profession develops its own jargon and it takes a courageous and independent soul to resist the deterioration of the language which results.

A second trait which communicators should preserve even if they opt for a management career is a broad approach to life. The best communicators I know are the most interesting people I know. They have a wide range of interests. They keep up with developments in behavioral science. They have a social conscience. And, almost always, they have an independent view on issues.

Those are precisely the qualities which enhance an individual's role in management. Business is by no means as monolitic as our critics imply, and in many cases it is considerably more "liberal" than outsiders assume. Still there's a natural tendency for a concensus view to develop in executive suits. Despite that -- perhaps because of it -- it's been my experience that alternative views are welcomed.

There are other skills to be preserved. A good communicator is not only a skilled interviewer but also knows when to listen -- and to whom to pay attention. You can pick up a good deal of management lore by simply being a good audience, and you can play a valuable management role by asking the right question at the right time. The healthy skepticism which every communicator develops over the years will prove extremely valuable as you begin to make management decisions. There are still snake oil salesmen in the world, and the analytical mind that can spot these characters -- or which can sense when even the well-intentioned manager is overselling his proposition -- is a useful presence in the executive suite.

I think it's apparent that a good many of the communicator's skills are readily transferable. But there are other talents which may have to be sharpened or even developed from scratch if you're going to feel comfortable in the executive suite.

In my own case the knowledge I found most wanting was in the financial field. Fortunately, it's not that hard to acquire. There are books and seminars on accounting for non-accountants. Even that may not be necessary. There

are two kinds of financial know-how the manager must acquire. First, you have to know enough about the subject in general to talk the language of the accountants and financial people. Second, you must have a real acquaintance with the statistical yardsticks that apply to your own business.

Talking the language can be simpler than you might imagine if you concentrate on the basic business judgments the financial expert is trying to apply. "Reserves," "provisions," "cash flow," and dozens of other terms have very realistic meaning, and if you once learn their significance you won't have trouble with the words themselves. And don't ever be bashful about asking "What does that mean?" The answer may help others as much as it does you.

Once you've moved into management you readily recognize the need to keep broadening your perspective. Your point of view is a little more elevated, and it's natural to take the bigger view. In the process you'll begin to see several "sides" to every question. What may have seemed indisputable from your vantage as a communicator may suddenly appear to have as many "cons" as "pros." In the process you'll discover that management views which seemed almost irrational when you weren't privy to all the arguments may make a good deal more sense.

Seizing the opportunity to take a broader view comes almost naturally. But initially you'll have to guard against adversary attitudes which can lead to the "garrison mentality" I've already suggested afflicts some communicators. Before you decide there's only one side to an argument (yours naturally) make

doubly certain that you understand the big picture. If you do that you'll avoid the feeling that the world is composed of the good guys and the bad, the black hats and the whites. And you'll avoid the mistake of circling the wagon train as you are besieged by the forces of ignorance. There's a right side and a wrong, but seldom is the decision between pitch black and pure white. Make sure you can distinguish the shades of gray.

Call it taking a broader view and attribute it to your new vantage point. Take advantage of it. But at the same time make sure that you don't lose touch. It's easy to do and it's not snobbery. The sheer variety of new problems and new considerations which afflict the new manager can often cause an alienation with your old environment and the people you've been associated with. When that begins to happen, stop it -- and remember that one of the biggest assets you bring to management is the "down the line" contacts you've nurtured over the years. Keeping them strong and intact is the best way in the world to facilitate upward communication.

As you focus on the "big picture" you'll quickly come to understand and appreciate the broader view you must bring to the business. As a communicator you might properly have been concerned with only the "how" of describing a management action. To the executive that's merely the final consideration, one which has been preceded by determining the "what" and "why" and the "whethers" of the action.

I don't suppose it's cricket to conclude a discussion like this without a word or two as to how you can make all this happen -- <u>if</u> your considered

and careful choice is a move into management. I'm sorry I don't have a magic formula for that question. A couple of observations may be helpful.

First, keep positioning yourself. You can do that by broadening your knowledge and experience. And conversely, don't fence yourself in. I've seen good communicators do just that by specializing too much, by falling in love with one aspect of their job and ignoring broader opportunities. As an editor I loved organizing words and graphics, and my favorite chore was editing a manuscript to make it work with a layout which, likely as not, I also did. Although Peter will tell you that, in my present role, I've been known to mess around with someone else's layouts, I long ago decided I did not want to be known as a layout specialist. As an editor on a business magazine, I loved photographic assignments -- until I learned that business contacts tolerated photographers but talked freely only to editors. My photography today is confined to sunsets on vacation.

I'm borrowing my second piece of advice from Vince Lombardi -- run for daylight. Seize opportunities when they come your way, particularly if they seem to be a little bit out of the ordinary. Don't ever take refuge in the assertion that "it's not really my job." If you do it well it can be your job and can lead to better things.

I don't subscribe to the view that an individual's success depends exclusively on being in the right place at the right time. I have a friend who was obviously disappointed with life -- and his constant refrain was that he had <u>not</u> been in the right place at the right time. That's nonsense.

Nevertheless, there is a certain element of good fortune in finding opportunities. But there's no question of chance in seizing the opportunity once it presents itself. That's up to you.

I suppose one could be taken advantage of if you accept every chore which somes along. Off hand, however, I can't think of that having happened to me despite my predilection for getting into a dazzling variety of things that really aren't my own business. My advice is to err on the side of seizing the opportunity rather than worrying about whether it's the smart thing to do.

Which, it occurs to me, is a good stopping point. It might have been the smart thing not to accept this assignment. I'm not at all sure I've said a great deal of value. But I still think my instinct to seize an opportunity was right in this case, too. Doing it insured me getting together for a short time with people I like and admire and if that's the bottom line, it <u>was</u> a good decision.